



## THREE CROSSES

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Crucifixion was a common practice in the Roman Empire. It was not an unusual site to see crosses erected outside the city wall of Jerusalem where passersby could see the sad spectacle. The Romans executed criminals and insubordinates in places where the people could see them to strike fear and submission into the hearts of their Jewish subjects.

During the final week of Jesus' ministry, Jerusalem was abuzz with pilgrims who had come there to observe the Passover. So, on that Friday, when Jesus was crucified, it was even more of a spectacle than ever. The Lord was not crucified alone. There were two others being put to death at the same time. Luke's account of the crucifixion reads like this in Luke 23, starting in verse 33: ***"And when they had come to the place called Calvary, there they crucified Him, and the criminals, one on the right hand and the other on the left."*** And then continuing down in verses 39-43: ***"Then one of the criminals who were hanged blasphemed Him, saying, 'If You are the Christ, save Yourself and us.' But the other, answering, rebuked him, saying, 'Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong.' Then he said to Jesus, 'Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom.' And Jesus said to him, 'Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise.'"*** It was not incidental that the fates of these three men collided on Calvary that day. There is a significance to each of the crosses that stood there, and we want to talk about that in our lesson today.

On this Passover Friday, three crosses dotted the landscape outside the wall of Jerusalem. Three men with very different dispositions hung upon those crosses and a conversation took place between them that encapsulates all human history. On the middle cross, was Jesus, the Lord. He was there dying for sin. On one side was another cross holding a proud and hardened criminal. He was dying IN sin. And on the other side, another cross, also holding a condemned criminal, but this one was humble and penitent, and we see him dying TO sin. I want us to stand, by faith, near Golgotha and gaze at these three crosses for a few moments and learn some of the lessons they are intended to teach us.

First: the middle cross. This was the cross of redemption; the cross on which an innocent man, falsely accused and condemned, was being put to death. This cross was not here incidentally or by accident. In fact, none of those crosses were there accidentally. But the middle cross, of course, was planned with a special significance. The scripture says that Christ was the lamb slain from the foundation of the world. (Revelation 13:8) One thousand years before this day, and hundreds of years before the practice of crucifixion had ever been thought of, the Psalmist prophesied of Christ saying, “they pierced by hands and my feet.” (Psalm 22:16) The determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God constructed that cross and raised it up on the Hill of Calvary that day, and the Divine become human was hanging there as an atonement for the sins of mankind. There has never been a ghastlier and grimmer site that the picture of Jesus Christ hanging on the cross because for one thing, it was a SUFFERING cross. No one can imagine what kind of suffering the victim of crucifixion experienced. Our word “excruciating” finds its basis the word crucify.

Often, as it was in Jesus’ case, the one being crucified went to the cross having already been mercilessly beaten and scourged. A scourging consisted of a whip or cat of nine-tails with shards of bone or metal woven into its cords being laid across the person’s bare back, cutting the flesh to ribbons and leaving it looking like raw meat. A heavy cross of wood with its rough texture and splinters was laid on top of those fresh, bleeding wounds and the condemned one was forced to carry it to the site of execution. His hands were then opened as a cruel soldier reached into his pouch and pulled out three iron nails. The median nerve was located at the joint of the hand and wrist and the soldier took out a mallet and drove a nail through each hand and then one through both feet. It was not a smooth nail like what you might obtain at the hardware store... it was a large, rough, and jagged spike that was sent plunging through the quivering flesh into the wood beneath, sending shocks of pain up the arms and legs and through the whole body. The cross was then lifted up and dropped into it a hole in the ground and a struggle to breath began that could last for hours and often lasted for days.

That’s but a small picture of the physical agony of the cross. For it was more than a SUFFERING cross; it was a SUBSTITUTIONARY cross. Unlike the thieves around Him, Jesus wasn’t dying a death that He deserved for He was sinless. He had not broken the laws of state nor the laws of God. He had never done anything the merit the punishment of the government. Even the man who sent Him to the cross, Pontius Pilate, realized that and only condemned Him as a political expediency. So, why WAS Jesus dying? Why did God determine such a thing and send Him to the cross? Because, the plan of God, which would allow God in His holiness and justice to punish sin and at the same in His love and mercy, justify and save the sinner demanded a substitute. 1 Peter 3:18 “For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit.” Paul said in Romans 3:24-26, “being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.” The cross of Christ and its expiatory sacrifice allowed sin’s debt to be paid while letting the debtor be released from the obligation. One commentator said: “The WISDOM of God searched the LOVE of God for a way to reconcile the JUSTICE of God with the MERCY of God and the result was the sending of his own (sinless) Son to die in the STEAD of (sinful) men.” Christ was the only one dying a death on Calvary that day that He didn’t deserve, and He was doing so vicariously for all of us who do deserve such a fate. The only way we can escape eternal death; the only means by which we can be reconciled to a holy and just God and be relieved of the punishment and wrath our sins have earned for us, is through faith in the One on the middle cross – He who was dying FOR sin.

But then, let's turn our attention to the side where one of the criminals has been crucified and where he is about to die IN sin. This thief hanging on the cross is a picture of where all of us belong. It was a cross of pride, rebellion, spiritual blindness, and hardheartedness. What a tragic irony and what a picture of an unbelieving world that he is suffering a death the one hanging mere feet away from Him was willing to endure for Him. We have no idea who this malefactor was or where he came from. We don't know the nature of all the crimes he committed, except that he had broken the laws of the land and thus had broken the laws of God, and that's all we need to know. The bible says in Romans 6:23 "the wages of sin is death but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." Ezekiel 18:20 declares "the soul who sins will die." Now, this man is literally and physically dying for the sins he has committed and he will soon experience the second death – an eternal death or separation from God – because of the life he has lived and the choices he has made. Isn't it sad that here he hangs, a few feet away from the Son of God; a few feet away, as it were, from the door to heaven; yet, in a few hours, he would experience eternal separation from that same God who was there willing to save him. That's a sad picture of so many in the world today. Is that a picture of you?

I don't know if that thief even knew who Jesus was, although it's hard to imagine that he had never at least heard of Jesus with all of the attention the public ministry of Jesus had attracted but he probably knew very little about Him. But here we live thousands of years later, with the gospel records of His life; the witness of His miraculous resurrection; millions upon millions of bibles in circulation that testify of Him; millions of sermons that have been preached about Him; a world that has been saturated with His influence; and yet, like that thief, they hang beside Him and rail upon Him and insult Him and reject Him. At least that thief probably didn't know much about Him. What excuse do you and I have?

But there was a third cross; this one also bearing a thief who deserved the death he was dying; but this thief ended up dying TO sin. Like the other thief, we don't know how familiar with Jesus he was before he went to Calvary. Perhaps very little. It could be that he, as a Jew, only began to piece together what was happening as he experienced Christ at the cross. Maybe he could see the inscription over the head of Christ declaring him "the King of the Jews", and it suddenly dawned upon Him that this was long awaited Messiah and King promised to his people, Israel. Maybe he had heard Jesus preach somewhere and watched a miracle or heard about His miracles and His claims and now, as He sees Him hanging there, something a piece of the divine puzzle suddenly dropped into place, and He realized Jesus is who He had claimed to be. Perhaps his heart had been moved and he knew there must be something unexplainable about this man as he saw Jesus look down from the cross at His executioners and critics, and pray "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." This was no ordinary man. Whatever the case, his heart was turned to Christ in the hours of death, and he cried out to Jesus to save him.

Here is a man who believed that Jesus was coming into a kingdom and held the keys to the next life. That's faith. Here's a man who is now humble and remorseful and turning His heart away from the wicked life he lived toward Christ. That's repentance. Here is a man who by his own admission knew he deserved to die for his crimes and was giving his allegiance to Christ. That's confession. And here is a man with those things taking place in his heart who is about to die with Christ and in the process, as opposed to the other thief who in unbelief is dying IN his sin, this thief is dying TO his sin. And the bible says of us in Romans 6:3 "do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection." This thief, placed His place in Christ, turned from His sin, confessed Christ, and died with Christ and therefore when he closed his eyes in death, he then opened them in Paradise.

In a sense that's a beautiful picture of what happens when go through the same process and we die with Christ and are buried with Him in the waters of baptism and rise to walk in the newness of life and are given the hope of eternal life. If the cross on one side is a picture of those who shake their fist at Christ and reject Him and die in their sins, this third cross is a picture of all who in simple faith turn in surrender to the Christ in the middle cross and appeal to Him for salvation.

Now, there's much confusion today over the salvation of this thief and what Jesus and what Jesus and His apostles have commanded men and women to do today to be saved. Yes, we call upon Christ and appeal to Him for salvation, but the New Testament teaches that we do this when, if faith, we are baptized into Christ. 1 Peter 3:21 tells us that baptism is "the answer of a good conscience toward God by the resurrection of Jesus Christ..." Greek scholars point out that the phrase "the answer of a good conscience" is an interrogative term. It was used in the Greek courts to speak of "making an appeal for something." Peter says that baptism is not a bath for the outside, but it is the appeal for an inward cleansing. That perfectly parallels what Ananias told Saul in Acts 22:16, saying, "...arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord." We, today, call upon Christ to save us when in faith we obey His command to be baptized. Now, you might raise the objection, "so, then, how could the thief have been saved with being baptized?" "Christ saved him without baptism so that must mean that baptism has nothing to do with being saved today."

Well, first of all, how do you know the thief was not baptized? John went about baptizing with the baptism of repentance unto the remission of sins and Jesus, and His disciples administered that baptism for a time as the transition from John to Jesus took place. "But how you know the thief was baptized at that time?" I don't! But neither do you know that he wasn't. It's just as much speculation to say that the thief WASN'T baptized as to say that he was, you see. The key is understanding what the Hebrew writer taught in Hebrews 9:15-18. There we read: "And for this reason He (Christ) is the Mediator of the new covenant, by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions under the first covenant, that those who are called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance. For where there is a testament, there must also of necessity be the death of the testator. For a testament is in force after men are dead, since it has no power at all while the testator lives. Therefore not even the first covenant was dedicated without blood."

Now, you may very well have a will and it works the same way as the kind of will the bible is talking about here. To have a functioning will you have to have 1) and estate or inheritance to distribute 2) a will that dictates how that estate is to be distributed 3) an executor to make sure the wishes of the testator are carried out and 4) the death of the person who made the will. Now, before that person dies, he or she can give their possessions to whomever they wish, whenever and however they wish. When they die, however, that last will and testament goes into effect and it is executed according to the stated wishes of the deceased. Jesus' estate consists of the riches of His grace and the redemption He purchased at the cross including the forgiveness of sins and the hope of eternal life. It includes sharing with Him in the kingdom that God have to Him when He returned to the Father's right hand. His will is the teaching of the gospel made known through His apostles. After He died and before ascending to heaven, He told them to "Go into the all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved. He who does not believe will be condemned." (Mark 16:15-16) The apostles were made the executors of His will. The blessings of His will are distributed to us upon meeting the conditions Christ stated in His will through the preaching of the apostles. And they did as Christ instructed them and went throughout the world preaching the gospel and telling people to believe the gospel, repent, and be baptized for the forgiveness of their sins. (Acts 2:38) When did that will become effective? The Hebrew writer points out that such a will only becomes of force AFTER the

death of the testator, which in this case in Christ who died on the cross AFTER He saved the penitent thief.

Friend, there are three crosses standing on the landscape of time today. There is the cross of rebellion and resistance. There is the cross of unbelief and disobedience where people die IN their sins. That thief was minutes from death, and he refused his only hope. You don't know how many minutes you have left, but they are precious and you're fooling if you turn away from the Christ on the middle cross. That cross is a cross of redemption and salvation where one died FOR sin. But then there is that third cross where a believing, penitent man died TO sin and that can be you today. Like that thief appealed to Jesus, YOU can appeal to Christ on the terms of His will by being baptized into Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. With eternity looming before you, I hope that you choose the course of that man who realized what a terrible life he had lived before God and who turned to the only One who save Him – the Christ on the middle cross.

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